DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 166 626 CG 013 241

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TITLE Can the Single Parent Parent As Well?
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association (55th, San Francisco, California, March 27-31, 1978) ; Best copy available

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Patterns; *Child Rearing; *Family Environment; *Family Influence; *One Parent Family; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Role; Parents; Sex Differences

ABSTRACT

The question of whether single parents are able to parent as well as those in two-parent families, as well as the differences between attitudes and practices of single mothers and fathers toward child rearing, were investigated. Members (N=179) of the Southeastern Wisconsin Parents Without Partners group completed the Single Parent Questionnaire, whose items were based on five interrelating variables important to child rearing: satisfaction with child rearing; nature of parental discipline, type and number of problem children, upbringing received by the parents; and extent of community support for single parents. Results indicated that single parents: (1) tended to be slightly authoritarian; (2) had a fairly strict upbringing; (3) were moderately satisfied with community services; (4) had more child rearing difficulties if they were female; and (5) expressed decreasing amounts of satisfaction with child rearing as the number of children in their custody increased. (HLM)

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Originally Presented at the
1978 Annual Meeting of the
American Orthopsychiatric Association
in San Francisco, California

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CAN THE SINGLE PARENT PARENT AS WELL? *

Background

The role of the single parent has been continuously viewed as both temporary and deviant. We have persisted in equating divorce with failure. The increasing numbers of single parents, however, has necessitated the altering of such views. It is not surprising to find the more recent literature reflecting a positive shift in attitude toward the single-parent family as a legitimate and viable lifestyle[3]. The 1975 United States census found that 4.5 million families with children under 18 are headed by single, divorced, widowed, or never-married parents. Ross and Sawhill[21] pointed not only to a long term upward trend in divorce but also in remarriage. They noted in 1970 almost one out of every five divorcees has remarried within a given year, thus implying that an additional turnover-factor must be noticed. Between 1954 and 1969, the number of female-headed single families increased by 40% and again by 22% between 1970 and 1974. By 1974, these female-headed households comprised 10% of all households in the United States and approximately 15% of all families with children[27]. The number of male-headed single families is also on the rise but has yet to comprise a significant percentage of national households. Prior to 1976, custody was only awarded to fathers in unusual circumstances, but between 1965 and 1972, the number of divorced and separated fathers heading families increased by 71% as compared to 58% for women. Currently, one-half million fathers are rearing minor children alone[9].

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* The author wishes to thank Ms. Cathy Parker, Ms. Mary Jane Tesch, Ms. Lois Garcia, and Ms. Karen Wedel for their invaluable research assistance, and the S. E. Wisconsin Parents Without Partners Organization, without whom this research project would not have been possible.

Women and children who form their own families run a high risk of poverty regardless of their prior income status. The mean income of single-parent families headed by women is significantly lower than that of male-headed single-parent families which is, in turn, lower than that of two-parent families. In 1972, more than half of all single-parent female-headed families were below the poverty line, compared with less than 10% of single-parent male-headed families (5,6,7,8). The unique needs, pressures, and concerns of the lone parent economically, socially, and "parentally" have only begun to be tapped. A review of the literature on this subject shows an over-riding concern for the "mother"-headed single family and its effects upon male children, with only scant attention paid to the "father"-headed family and its effects upon female children. Proportionately fewer "father"-headed families exist in large part because child custody in divorce cases has almost always gone to the mother, while fathers, in order to get custody, must demonstrate financial resources that will be respected by the courts.[15, 16]

The social needs of the single parent are second in importance only to their financial needs. Groups such as Parents Without Partners and Solo Partners are symptomatic of this. Research has shown that intact families avoid friendships with any type of broken family[4] and that single fathers more often seek friendships with other single fathers. Additional studies show that social support is more readily available to the single father[18]. Still, the major problem of the single parent is loneliness[18] and acceptance[14] with widowed parents being the most- and never-married parents being the least-accepted by society.

Child-rearing comprises yet another vast area of concern for the single parent. More than 16% of all the children in the United States have experienced a parental divorce[28]. Most will spend time living in a fatherless home which tends to evince lower self-esteem and lessen the chance of doing well in school[10].

In recent studies of psychiatric outpatients, children of divorce comprised one-third of all outpatients and had a higher rate of occurrence of delinquency. Specific sexual "acting out", drug abuse, and overt aggression were among the reasons for referral.[12, 13, 17] Numerous studies have shown a correlation between father absence and delinquency, even if only as an important secondary role to other environmental influences.[1,2,6,23] Boys of father-absent families appear to be more adversely affected by divorce than girls. The younger these boys are at the time of divorce, the greater their problem. Recent reports, however, have shown that father-absence is directly related to the girls' lack of development of emotional security and interacting skills with males; even though these problems often do not appear until latency.[22]

There is absolutely no way that one person can fulfill two parental roles. The departure of one parent leads to changes in the way that the remaining Parent and the children relate to one another. In the single-parent female-headed household the boundary between mother and children tends to become less distinct. In such a situation, one mother might be relieved to become the sole authority of her household -- especially if she had perceived her husband as undermining her parental authority. For another woman, the loss of her spouse might indicate a threatening loss of backup support, especially as an older child tries to assume part of the absent parent's relinquished authority. She might feel she needs to become more authoritarian. But in either case, children provide a structure and purpose for life, and many single-parent mothers seem to feel closer to their children.

The single mother can attempt to fulfill the psychology and economic roles of two parents; she can try to live up to expectations for the nuclear family that are not applicable or appropriate to her; and she can compare her children to standards that are irrelevant to their lives. But she will

become frustrated and lose trying to use nuclear family norms and solutions for her problems. She may even become a martyred mother, perceiving herself the crippled head of a crippled nuclear family. Such a family is one destined for failure.

Single parenthood is an alternative lifestyle and one largely without norms or models. It need not be crippling or second rate. A competent and self-confident head of household can be a child's most important source of security. A tranquil one-parent home may be a healthier environment for child development than a stressful two-parent home.

Divorce, in particular, is not only the loss of a spouse as a partner, but also the loss of social definitions associated with marriage, of social respectability, and the loss of social freedom. Public censure appears to stem from the belief that the parent could not or would not maintain the marriage at least "for the sake of the children." Therefore, the single parent is put on the defensive and tends to feel that one must always prove to others, concern for the children. Guilt surrounding marital separation, coupled with the anxiety evoked by public scrutiny and social censure, lowers self-esteem at the very time a single parent needs all the available support.

No matter how well functioning her family, the single-parent mother is likely to be overburdened. There are too many decisions to make, too many tasks to complete, too many tensions to bear, too little time she can call her own. Two parents would hardly seem enough to deal with all the demands of child care. One parent seems clearly to be insufficient. Sole responsibility overburdens as surely as too many things to do. The overburden becomes psychological as well as physical.[8] Research indicates that recognition of their sole responsibility seems to make women who are single parents even more vulnerable than other parents to anxiety lest they somehow fail their

children, and even more vulnerable to guilt for any shortcomings in the way things turn out.[19]

The Research

Concerns such as these led this researcher to explore the following questions: Can the single parent parent as well as two-parent families? Are there any significant differences between the attitudes, practices, etc., of single mothers or single fathers toward child rearing?

Five interrelating variables important to child rearing are (1) the extent of satisfaction in child rearing, (2) the nature of parental discipline, (3) the extent, type, and number of problem children, (4) the type of "upbringing" received by the parents, and (5) the extent and nature of community support for the single parent. Items elaborating upon these variables and targeted at the mentioned research questions were incorporated in the "Single Parent Questionnaire". The resulting single parent survey's findings contribute to the bulk of the remainder of this paper. Where appropriate, recent relevant single parent and two-parent findings from Flanzer, Wiviott and Waller's Multiple Model Pre-school Project[7] and Chilman's Parent Experience Survey of middle class marital satisfaction and child rearing[5] is also reported.

The Primary Sample

The Single Parent Questionnaire was devised and distributed among members of the Southeastern Wisconsin Parents Without Partners group -- a group well known for their attempt to bring single parents together. And, as it "bore out", the 179 respondents all reflected norms of white, middle class single parents: 130 divorced, 23 separated, 23 widowed, 1 never married, 137 with custody (16 male, 12 female), 42 without custody (37 male, 5 female).

TABLE I

For instance, the overwhelming majority of men's economic condition improved after their divorce. The few men who had custody of their children reported no change after becoming a single parent. The overwhelming majority of women retained custody of their children and reported a one-third drop in their income -- precisely that reflected in Chilman's Parent Experience Review.[5]

The women not having custody reported no appreciable change after becoming a single parent. The men were satisfied with their income and with their jobs, working many more hours than necessary. The women were not, reflecting their less than 50% earning power and the fact that 33% were looking for work; one-third of the sample found themselves under the poverty line. A full 24% of the women in the sample were working outside their home without pay. The more children in custody, the less likely to work with pay.

TABLE II $P < .001$

All the men in the sample worked for pay. None of the men received welfare, alimony, or financial help from relatives. Those who are Catholic are yet significantly poorer than those who are Protestant even though no significant difference can be surmised in their total number of children.

TABLE III $P < .03$

Men with or without custody had more free time, and correspondingly dated more. The women in the sample, regardless of age, dated significantly less often than the men. As expected, the single woman was significantly younger than the single man, having younger children and less education.

TABLE IV

Only eight single parents, all women, lived with relatives -- their mothers. Of great interest was the fact that 22 women with custody desired not to have custody, while 22 men who did not have custody desired it. As expected, the Wisconsin men expressed a great deal of resentment at the court procedure for obtaining custody.

The custody question is, of course, a major variable in this study. The presence or not of a "visiting" father or mother affects child rearing attitudes and burdens. Reflecting the American norms, 43 out of 86 (or 50%) of the single parent-divorced women with custody in our sample report that their ex-husbands never visit their children; the other 50% report a wide range of visiting patterns. Only two out of 28 (or 7%) of the single-parent-divorced men with custody in our sample report no visitation by their ex-wives. Not surprisingly, the men in the sample view their time visiting of children much more favorably than do the women; this to a highly significant probability level.

TABLE V $P < .01$

The sex of the single parent was found to be the significant factor behind the following item variables: difficulties in rearing children, adequacy of available cash and income level, availability of credit, spending power, liking of household work and chores, and the asking for help from parents and friends. This finding is noted not to be a phenomenon only of single parenting; as Chilman's study showed these same variables to be differentiated by sex in the same expected direction when referred to intact married couples.

Child Rearing, Extent and Satisfaction

Seventy-eight percent (102/131) of the single-parent survey sample found child rearing satisfying; 22% (29/131) did not. Interestingly, the greater number of children "in custody", the lesser the chance for child rearing satisfaction.

TABLE VI $P < .02$

Few had more than four children; thus, the disenchantment with child rearing is found in the same inverse relationship to family size of four or less as found in two-parent families.

Reasons given for their satisfaction in having children varied. The two most frequent reasons given were: their "love for them" and "the joy in watching them develop and grow." Interestingly, the former reason (their love for them) was checked significantly less often while the latter reason (watching them develop and grow) was checked significantly more often as the number of children in custody rose.

TABLE VII $P < .05$

One might expect single-parent women, more than single-parent men, to see the child rearing role as more important than other work roles. However, "having custody" rather than sex is the significant factor. Men with custody see the importance of child rearing roles over other roles significantly more often than the men without custody.

TABLE VIII $P < .026$

Again, custody, not sex, is the factor behind high correlations of the time spent with children, the importance of the family, and community involvement. However, the women with custody will also turn significantly more often to her parents for child rearing help and finding herself with less free time than her male counterpart.

TABLE IX $P < .005$

Surprisingly, though, the satisfaction in child rearing itself does not significantly vary by the amount of community involvement, income, job satisfaction. Men, regardless of custody, find their respective visiting arrangements much more favorable than the women.

TABLE X $P < .02$

Age, sex, religion, housing of the single parent do not appear to be significant factors effecting difficulties with child rearing or the relative importance of the child rearing role.

When asked to rate themselves as to their enjoyment as a parent against other parents, the couples in Chilman's Parent Experience Study[3] who were highly satisfied as parents rated themselves highly against other parents. Conversely, those with little parental satisfaction rated themselves low against other parents. In the single-parent sample, most rated themselves as average to less enjoyment against other parents. Yet, 84.6% of these single parents reported being happy as parents. In Chilman's survey, those Parents who were highly satisfied with child rearing primarily reported that having children strengthened their marriage; the low-satisfied group primarily reported weakened or no effect on the marriage. Not surprisingly, the divorced parent in the single-parent sample similarly reported the children's lack of or weakening effect on the marriage. Overwhelmingly (77.5%), the single parents reported single parenthood as more difficult than married parenthood.

Child Rearing and Discipline

Phelps,[26] in his 1969 study, asked a very germane question: "Do families where the mother is the sole parent significantly differ from two-parent families in their attitudes toward family life and behavior?" Schaeffer's PARI (Parental Attitude Research Instrument) was used to compare the answers of the groups of parents, finding the two groups significantly differing on the use of authority in raising their children. Subsequent interviews showed one-parent families being considerably stricter than two-parent families. No group differences were found regarding hostility-rejection of their children nor in the parent's democratic attitudes toward child rearing practices. Preliminary results utilizing the observer scale (the PCI, Parent-Child Interaction Inventory) in the Multiple Model Pre-School Program[7] yielded similar results. Single parents appear to be more authoritarian disciplinarians.

Unable to gather direct observations of single parent-child interactions, a series of related child-rearing, attitudinal, and child-problem focused items were incorporated into the Single-Parent Questionnaire.

Seven questions asked in the Parent Experience Survey were:

1. Par Boss -- Children need to learn early that parents are the bosses in the family.
2. P Loving -- Children will usually outgrow bad behavior if the parents are loving and set a good example.
3. C Watched -- Children will get away with all the mischief they can; they need to be watched constantly and punished whenever they do anything wrong.
4. C Punish -- Many children pay no attention to mild punishment; they need a good whipping from time to time.
5. C Rights -- Children have rights in the family; by the time they are 3 or 4 years old, they should have a say about family plans that concern them.
6. C Obey -- Children should learn early to obey their parents and do what they are told.

7. C Reward -- It is better to reward children for doing what is right than to punish them for what is wrong.

TABLE XI

Clearly the females of the parent experience and single-parent survey populations have similar agreement percentage difference on these seven child-rearing attitudinal items. The single-male parent does not significantly differ on these attitudinal questions from his single female counterpart.

The single men, however, certainly expect children to be capable of being independent later than the women, even though as cited earlier, the father also tends to deny the existence of their child's problem.

TABLE XII

Problem Children

Women, significantly more often than men, stated in the single-parent survey that one or more of their children were having problems needing attention. These men and women reported child problems in the same frequency distribution as did those dissatisfied parents in the Parent Experience Survey tended to report their children healthier than women. Of those reporting these problems,

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TABLE XIII

40% (39/97) referred to discipline problems; 15% (15/97) referred to the child's health problem; and the remaining 55% cited a myriad of other problem categories. The most common child behaviors which were upsetting to the parents were "fighting" and "talking back".

TABLES XIV & XV

Of course, "talking back" was most common with those who have teenage children. Men without custody seem to be more worried about their fighting with their children and their demands for attention. Sample size and the spread of responses discourage significant testing attempts. Teenagers worry these parents the most, their worst problem being grades. This can be seen in the total breakdown of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd children (Table XV). Table XV helps point out how the second child tends to take a greater "brunt" of the loss of a full-time parent.

The single parents most frequently selected (1) "talking sternly with their child" (49%); (2) "seeking a counselor's help" (23%); and (3) "physically punishing their child" (16%) as what they do when upset by the child. Yet in partial contradiction, they selected "physically punishing" (35%), "talking with their ex-spouse" (24%); and "talking sternly with their child" as the action they would least likely take. "Losing one's temper" appeared to be a female selection. The infrequent selection of this item is suspect. Forty-three percent of the parents reported their children to have improved, having lessened problem symptoms, while 55% reported their children's problems having worsened (2% never married).

Upbringing

As one would expect, the single-parent women were raised much more strictly by their mothers than were the single-parent men.

TABLE XVI

Corresponding to the two-parent findings in the Parent Experience Survey, the happiness of the single parent's childhood positively correlated with their happiness with their own child-rearing situation. Those who felt they were raised too strictly tended to feel that children needed to be punished and that they, the parents, were the boss. The single parents tended to report a stricter upbringing than did the married parents in the Parent Experience Survey sample. Statistical computations of significance cannot be made.

Community Support

Both single men and women were moderately satisfied with the availability of support services (Satisfied 60%; Dissatisfied 40%). A few more single parents reported more support/acceptance given to them as a single parent by family/friends (more 58%; less 42%). The community's support level did not seem to effect parenting attitudes. Surprisingly, even the availability of parental support for babysitting services (and the like) did not seem to effect parenting attitude or satisfaction.

Thus, little difference can be cited overall between two-parent and one-parent families in their child-rearing stance. A tendency to be stricter, more authoritarian is noted. Although the children of single parents tend to be overrepresented in our social agencies, this study does not point to a difference in parenting attitude/ability, time, or community resources. The hinted correlations between parental dissatisfaction in the Parent Experience Survey, particularly the children's effect in the marriage, and unhappy marriages implied in the predominance of divorces lends to implications elsewhere. The instrument and survey itself is not above criticism. Those preferring observable interaction research over attitudinal surveys would find fuel for validity arguments here.

Further research certainly needs to be done differentiating between the parenting skills and the marriage skills of the single parent. A relationship

between the single parent survey responses and the parent dissatisfaction responses suggests that an underlying factor of life/marital dissatisfaction is affecting both. What is there about the divorced single parents that allowed them to get a divorce and not remain in a dissatisfying marital situation that impinges upon child rearing? Further research is needed.

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TABLE I

Marital Status by Sex

	Divorced	Separated	Widowed	Never Married	TOTAL
Men	41	8	4	0	53
Women	89	15	19	1	126
	130	23	23	1	179

Custody by Sex

	Male	Female
With	16	121
Without	37	5
	53	126

TABLE II

Number of Children in Custody
by Number Working for Pay

#Custody	Working for Pay: Yes	No	
1	30	3	
2	43	8	
3	20	5	$X^2 = 17.74$
4	9	10	$P < .001$
5	5	4	
	107	30	

TABLE III

Religion of Single Parent by Income

Religion	Income -- $1,000 ≤5	5-10	10-15	15-20	>20
Catholic	17	28	14	10	5
Protestant	3	32	16	13	4
	20	60	30	23	9

$X^2 = 20.468$
$P < .0332$

TABLE IV

Education Level by Sex of Single Parent

Sex	Grade school	High school	Tech. training	2 yrs. college	3-4 yrs. college	5 or more yrs. college	TOTAL	%
Male	2	9	14	9	8	9	51	29.1
Female	2	49	18	27	23	5	124	70.9
TOTAL	4	58	32	36	31	14	175	
%	2.3	33.1	18.3	20.6	17.7	8.0		100.0

$X^2 = 18.2$
$P < .0027$

TABLE V

View of Father's Time Visiting Children
by Sex of Single Parent

Sex	View: Favorable	Unfavorable	
Male	26	4	$X^2 = 9.43$
Female	31	37	$P < .01$
	57	41	

TABLE VI

Child Rearing Satisfaction
by the Number of Children in Custody

Child Rearing Satisfaction	Number in Custody: one	two	three	more than three
Satisfying	27	34	16	25
Not satisfying	5	15	8	1

$X^2 = 9.62$ $P < .02$
S.D. = 1.168, t = 10.92, $P < .000$

TABLE VII

Reasons for Satisfaction of Child Rearing
by Number of Children in Custody

Reason	# of children one	two	three or more	
Love for them	7	8	5	
Watch them develop	7	7	22	$X^2 = 6.72$
	14	15	27	$P < .05$

TABLE VIII

-t- test

Men with Custody/No Custody
and Importance of Child Rearing

Variable	#cases	S.D.	S.E.	t	2 tail prob.
Men custody					
Child Rearing Satisfaction	50	1.35	.192	-2.29	.026

TABLE IX

Turning to Parents for Help
By Sex of Single Parent

Sex	Parents Help: No help needed	Help needed	
Male	13	23	$X^2 = 7.89$
Female	15	98	$P < .005$
	28	121	

TABLE X

Visiting Arrangements
by Sex of Single Parent

Sex	Visiting: Unfavorable	Favorable	
Male	4	26	$X^2 = 6.08$
Female	26	42	$P < .02$
	30	68	

TABLE XI

Comparison Agreement Percentages
Females: SPQ and Parent Experience Survey by Child-Rearing Attitude

Child-Rearing Attitude	Single-Parent Questionnaire	Parent Experience Survey
Par Boss	90.5%	81.4%
P Loving	79.5%	79.3%
C Watched	40.5%	26.7%
C Punish	22.3%	24.5%
C Rights	62.8%	63.1%
C Obey	92.2%	83.7%
C Reward	87.9%	82.9%

TABLE XII

View of the Age for Child's Independence
by Sex of Single Parent

	Age: 9-11	12-14	14	T	
Male View	4	28	17	1 / 49	
Female View	23	74	18	115	
T 2	27	102	35	164	$X^2 = 9.85$ $df = 2$ $P < .01$

TABLE XIII

Children Having Problems
by Sex of Single Parent

Sex	Child Problems: No Problems	Problems	
Male	14	22	$X^2 = 9.97$
Female	6	55	$P < .0016$
	20	77	

TABLE XIV

Breakdown: Designated Child Problems

Problem	First Child	%	Second Child	%	Third Child	%
School	7	9.2	2	4.7	2	7.7
Poor Grades	13	17.1	8	18.6	1	3.8
Withdrawn	6	7.9	3	7.0	1	3.8
Anxious	3	3.9	2	4.7	1	3.8
Stealing	2	2.6	1	2.3	3	11.5
Drugs	2	2.6	3	7.0	0	0.
Sexual Activity	3	3.9	3	9.3	1	3.8
Day Dreams	3	5.3	2	4.7	2	7.7
Mental Handicap	1	1.3	4	9.3	1	3.8
Physical Handicap	7	9.1	1	1.2	0	0.
Persistent Whining	4	5.3	2	4.7	1	3.8
Poor choice of friends	4	5.3	4	9.3	4	2.2
Trouble with police	2	2.6	1	2.3	1	3.8
Temper tantrums	6	7.9	7	16.3	3	11.5
Other	18	23.4	6	14.	7	26.9
		100		100		100
Not reported	97		129		150	

TABLE XV

Breakdown: Things that Children Do that Really Upset the Single Parent

Behavior	First Child	%	Second Child	%	Third Child	%
Fighting	60	33.5	17	9.5	7	3.9
Whining	21	11.7	13	7.3	9	5.0
Messing Up House	10	5.6	22	12.2	9	16.2
Bad language	3	1.7	2	1.1	8	4.5
Sex play	0	0.	0	0.	1	.6
Lying	4	2.2	11	6.1	4	2.8
Poor school work	8	4.5	15	8.4	13	7.3
Demand attention	4	2.2	10	5.6	13	1.7
Refuse to obey	13	7.3	18	10.1	21	11.7
Talking back	26	14.5	28	15.6	17	9.5
Other	9	5.0	4	3.2	6	3.4
Missing	21	11.7	39	21.8	60	33.5
	179	100	179	100	179	100

TABLE XVI

Discipline of Single Parent's Mother by Sex of Single Parent

Sex	Mother's Discipline: Strict	Lenient
Male	27	25
Female	85	37
	112	62

$X^2 = 4.26$
$P < .0389$